

Newspapers Support Library

During the past several months newspapers across the state have voiced their support of first amendment freedoms. Their voice has been raised because of the issues associated with the Columbus County Commissioners' instructions to Amanda Bible to remove a specific volume from the library. The book in question is *Wifey*, by Judy Blume.

Public libraries are not the only libraries which have experiences with attempts at censorship. School libraries, as well as some academic libraries, experience subtle and sometimes not so subtle attempts.

The issue in Columbus County is larger than the availability of a single book. The issue is the question of access, freedom of access, to information. We are grateful for the support of the press, and in this issue reprint some of the editorials from across the state.

NO ONE HAS RIGHT TO CENSOR LIBRARY BOOKS

Once again the specter of censorship intruded into the affairs of Columbus County Public Library—and thus its patrons and taxpayers. And once again, library officials refused to consider censorship.

In our opinion, the board of trustees exercised good judgement. Censorship has no place in our library system.

The issue came about when the mother of a 12-year old child complained that she had found her reading the book, "Wifey," after borrowing it from the library. The language of the two pages which the mother copied and distributed contained vulgar words. Even the most liberal interpretation would rule it was not fit material for a 12-year old.

But that is beside the point, we think. "Wifey" sold a lot of volumes. Patrons demand that popular novels be placed on the shelves of the library and, after all, the patrons foot the bills for the facility. "Wifey" certainly is not literature. It may best be characterized as "trash." But there's no accounting for taste.

The definition of pornography is "obscene or licentious writing or painting." The Supreme Court of the United States has defined it for the purpose of litigation as material that appeals only to our prurient interests and has no redeeming social value. "Wifey," as bad as it is to some of us, does not fit the definition. (Neither do the magazines "Playboy" and "Penthouse," for that matter.)

The complainant failed to appear before the board of trustees to argue her case. She has contacted pastors and local and state officials. She is fighting a losing battle.

The problem with censorship is, Whose judgment will prevail? Former Horry County (S.C.) Solicitor Bud Long had the county police raid magazine racks in convenience stores throughout his county a few years ago. At his orders, police confiscated all magazines Long considered pornographic. But the court said he was wrong.

If books some people consider "un-Christian" and unfit for the library cannot be removed, what then? The complainant would have library staff become policemen, refusing to allow juveniles access to adult book racks. But the nationally-accepted "Library Bill of Rights" says, "The rights of an individual to the use of a library should not be denied or abridged because of his age."

The answer, says the library board, is for parents to exercise control over what their children read. It is parents' responsibility. We do not expect library staff, county commissioners or state officials to do the job parents should be doing.

Censorship has no place in a nation which has a Constitution and First Amendment such as ours. The same First Amendment which guarantees the freedoms of speech, press, assembly and redress of grievances also guarantees freedom of religion.

The complaint before the library has as its basis a mother's interpretation of Christianity. If she is going to abridge the First Amendment to deny rights which belong to others as well as herself, it means she invalidates her freedom of religious expression.

We are proud of our library and its resources. Everyone has a choice to read the material he or she personally enjoys. No one has the right to impose their own brand of censorship on them.

THE NEWS REPORTER
Whiteville, North Carolina
February 25, 1980

BELIEVE IT: COMMISSIONERS VOTE TO CENSOR BOOK

It is not to be believed, but it is true: Wednesday, after holding a closed-door session with our librarian, the Columbus Board of Commissioners voted unanimously to send a letter to her demanding that the controversial adult novel, "Wifey," be removed from the facility's shelves.

In our opinion, the commissioners have returned us to pre-Revolutionary days, when a tyrannical government attempted to dictate what people should read and how they should think. That was before we had a Constitution, the First Amendment and the Bill of Rights.

The "executive" session with Librarian Amanda Bible was called on a pretext to discuss her employment. It was a violation of the N. C. Open Meetings Law, if not in letter then in spirit. The real purpose of the meeting was to put pressure on Mrs. Bible.

What the commissioners do not understand is this:

—They are opening the door to the lunatic fringe; anyone who objects to any of the tens of thousands of books in our library now has a forum of judges who may try to suppress it.

—Their action violates the freedoms guaranteed by our form of democracy. They are, in effect, satisfying a tiny minority for the sake of votes on May 6 and disregarding the majority.

—They have usurped the authority of the Library Board of Trustees, whom they have appointed, eight intelligent and knowledgeable persons.

—Their action undermines the morale of the library personnel, including Mrs. Bible, under whose supervision book circulation has more than tripled in seven years.

—They have set the stage for legal action by any citizen, the American Civil Liberties Union and Intellectual Freedoms Committee of the North Carolina and American Library Associations, all of whom have expressed interest in the month-long controversy.

There is no way the people can win unless they decide to challenge the Board of Commissioners in court.

We feel that the Library Board will continue to reaffirm its policies.

If this happens, the Board of Commissioners has two choices: Either let the matter rest or remove the board. In any case, they also have the option of the last word by cutting the library budget.

One may ask how the Board of Commissioners has suddenly become qualified to become a board of censors. We can't answer that question. All are unlettered and, believe it or not, none has even applied for a library card!

One thing the commissioners may have overlooked in their haste to please a small group of residents:

Those who support the Library Board's decisions have not yet been heard from. We expect the commissioners may be surprised that they have bucked the majority, and that surprise may come on the evening of May 6.

THE NEWS REPORTER
Whiteville, North Carolina
April 10, 1980

COMMISSIONERS MAKE COLUMBUS A LAUGHING-STOCK

Reaction to the latest move by our Board of Commissioners in the North Carolina press has made this country, to echo the words of a letter to the editor, a laughing-stock.

It is sad, but true. Despite Commissioner David McPherson's efforts to turn black into white at a meeting of the library trustees Sunday night, the commissioner's request to Library Director Amanda Bible to remove a book from circulation is censorship.

McPherson, who said he was speaking for himself, told the approximately 150 persons present for the meeting that neither he nor any of the other commissioners intended to censor anything. Strangely silent were three other commissioners who were present: Chairman C. Waldo Marlowe, L. A. Hinson and Junior Dew.

It also is said that the large group of self-styled "born again" Christians who were present to protest the controversial novel, "Wifey," showed little of the love by which Christians are known.

But then, it is an emotional issue, one which nearly got out of hand but for the firm resolve of Library Board Chairman Howard Straughan. The other people present were incensed and infuriated at the commissioners' attempt at censorship.

Nothing was resolved at Sunday night's meeting, other than to vent emotions. While there were attempts at reason, no one was willing to reason. As Straughan said, the issue is not the book, but the censorship. And as Hallsboro pastor Wayne Blythe pointed out, once the door is open the most likely target of censorship will be the religious book collection purchased with tax dollars.

In recent editorials, we have said just about all that can be said about the dangers of imposing one's personal beliefs and biases upon others. We add that it is the birthright of every American to enjoy the freedoms guaranteed by the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States.

Thinking people feel frustrated by the Board of Commissioners' attempt to thwart those freedoms, feeling that their birthright has been sold for a mess of votes in the May 6 primary elections. Three of the commissioners are running for renomination: Dew, McPherson and Hinson.

Should the N. C. Attorney General—whose opinion of the commissioners' action has been requested by County Attorney Jim Hill—rule that the commissioners are in error, we expect some more backtracking and an apology from the board of fine men.

Failing that, it is our understanding that the county board will find themselves in court, where at least all will get a fair hearing.

THE NEWS REPORTER
Whiteville, North Carolina
April 14, 1980

A LITANY FOR COLUMBUS COUNTY

The Ayatollah speaks in Iran today and television stations and newspapers are closed unless they follow the Ayatollah's thinking. He even tells Iranian women how they must attire themselves in public. Some are great thinkers, but this little thinker has the power, and he has spoken!

In Columbus County today, the Board of Commissioners have told us that one of our books must be taken out of our library, and the Commissioners have spoken!

Hail, Caesar!

The people own the Columbus County Public Library. Materials on the shelves reflect freedom of thought, speech and press. Well-meaning but misguided little thinkers want to be the people who select what everyone else will read. They do not understand that the same Constitution which protects them also protects Jews, Moslems and even atheists. They have convinced the Commissioners that things can work here as they do in Iran.

Books, magazines, reviews and paintings in our library contain great thoughts and little thoughts. This combination of great and little thinkers reflects the melting pot which has become America, many different nation-

alities, religions, skin colors and philosophies. But the Commissioners have decided that the thoughts of one little thinker contained in one book is a threat, and they have spoken!

Hail, Caesar!

Our Constitution provides for due process of law as well as freedom of thought, speech and press. As good citizens, we do not break a law with which we disagree, but work through our system of due process to have that law changed. The Board of Commissioners denied due process by acting first and asking about the law later.

They "cannot put a 'hold' on things for which we don't have the answers legally."

There was another little thinker a generation ago who decided people must not read books written by Jews. The other little thinkers who were not Jews agreed with him. They went out and burned thousands of Jewish books in the streets. Later, they burned thousands of Jews. It all began with the burning of one book, and our Commissioners have spoken!

Hail, Caesar!

But there are many little thinkers in Columbus County who don't believe banning one book is enough. They would like the Board of Commissioners to have all books carefully screened and selected so our library would become sanitary. They don't realize it is not a hospital or a church. What they want is a purge of our library. Stalin liked that word, "purge." When he finished purging wrong thinkers, they couldn't think anymore. They were dead.

One mark of a little thinker is that he seldom knows when he is wrong. When that rare situation occurs, he will not admit he is wrong. Our Board of Commissioners has been told by bigger thinkers that they are wrong. But our Commissioners won't admit to it. They have spoken!

Hail, Caesar!

Little thinkers are sensitive to criticism by bigger thinkers. They gather in large groups for protection, especially at election time. When they feel threatened, these groups become even larger. They are like lemmings, tiny thinkers who from large groups and rush headlong over cliffs. Rash actions lead little thinkers to unfortunate ends, for who knows what is beyond those cliffs? But then, our Commissioners have spoken?

Now Hitler, although he was a little thinker, invented something to deceive other little thinkers into acting like lemmings. His invention was called "The Big Lie." That is an untruth so monstrous that most little thinkers will believe it. Columbus County also has a "Big Lie." That was told when the Commissioners said they would not ever censor a book.

And they have spoken!

Hail, Caesar!

THE NEWS REPORTER
Whiteville, North Carolina
April 17, 1980

Don't let history be a thing of the past

Many voices have told the story of America. From the famous to the obscure, they have described and analyzed the ideas, events, and leaders that shaped the nation. Sitting Bull is just one example of an individual whose documented words and deeds are an important aspect of America's past.

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—*Sitting Bull*, in U.S. Serial Set, 45th Cong., 2d Sess., 1877, H. Exec. Doc. 1, p. 724.

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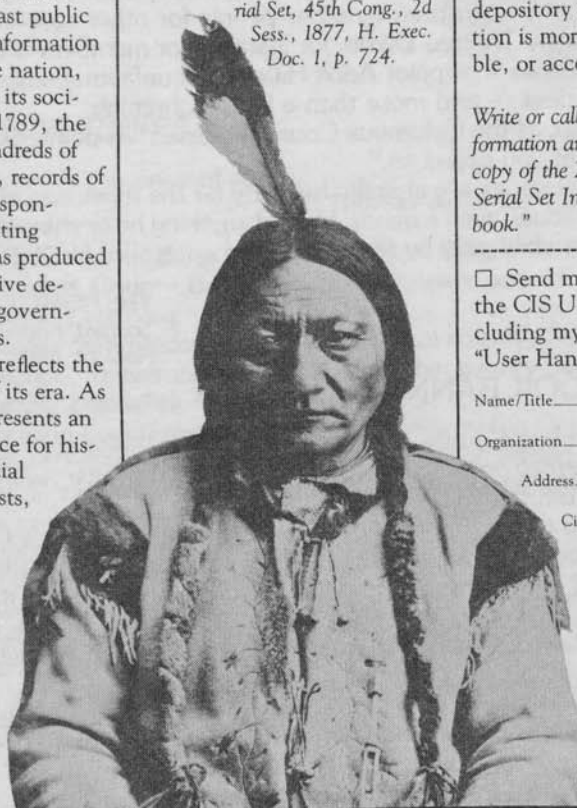
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THE RIGHT TO READ—DO NOT ABRIDGE IT

The people of Columbus County are in a hassle—over a book.

One parent, upset by the contents of a book, "Wifey," which her 12-year-old daughter brought home from the county library, asked that the library board ban that book from the shelves. The board refused.

Then the Columbus County commissioners, under pressure from the angered parent and a few others, got into the act. It ordered the book removed from the shelves.

This confrontation may very well wind up in the courts before the question of whether the commissioners have the right to ban the book, or others that might come into question, is settled.

Members of the library board and at least one member of the commission do not believe that the commission has the authority it has taken upon itself in the attempt to ban the book. The Library Bill of Rights declares, in part, that minors' access to books cannot be limited by anyone but the child's parents, which means, if taken literally, that neither the county commission nor the library board or employees can keep a child from checking out a particular book; only his parents can do that.

A parent has the right to be concerned over what his child reads. But to insist that, in order to control that right, certain books be taken off the shelves is opening up a far worse problem. If people can censor books for one reason, in this case sexual references which are considered objectionable by parents, then other books can be censored by other people for other reasons. Blacks can object to books by Thomas Dixon, for instance, or members of the Nazi party can object to books that paint Adolf Hitler in an unfavorable light. The possibilities are limitless — and more than a little frightening.

Censorship, as the Columbus County librarian has pointed out, "depends entirely on what you object to."

A couple of issues are at stake here. By far the most important one is the right of an individual, even a minor, to read anything he or she wants, restricted in the case of a child only by the advice and control of his own parents.

THE HERALD

Sanford, North Carolina

April 12, 1980

SHELVE BOOK BANNING

The Columbus County commissioners overstepped the bounds of good judgment when they ordered the county librarian to remove "Wifey," a novel by Judy Blume, from the shelves.

There is no doubt that the book is sexually explicit. Elaine Cumbee, who complained about the book after her 12-year-old daughter checked it out, has a perfect right, if she wishes, to prevent her child from reading it. It is equally without doubt, however, that there are a great many people who are not offended by the book, since it was a best-seller, even though they might consider it unsuitable for children.

It would be helpful for public libraries to offer more guidance to parents and youngsters on appropriate reading material. But government bodies, such as

the Columbus Board of Commissioners, and other would-be book banners ought not to insist that public libraries stock only books that offend no one.

Howard Straughn, chairman of the county library trustees, made a convincing point. "People are taking the position that this book is what this controversy is all about," he said. "It is not. What is going to happen the next time Mrs. Cumbee or somebody else complains about a book?"

A quick look at book-banning efforts—mostly in the schools—in the last few years shows they can get ludicrously out of control. In Anaheim, Calif., the school board recently banned most of Shakespeare, Dickens and Twain. In 1977, a controversy developed in Elkader, Iowa, over Woody Guthrie, the Beatles, James Thurber, Ogden Nash, William Saroyen [sic] Carl Sandburg and Stephen Vincent Benet. Even the American Heritage Dictionary has been criticized for its definitions of such words as "hot" and "slut" and for listing "bed" as a transitive verb.

Mrs. Cumbee's daughter checked out "Wifey" on her first trip to the public library. The library could offer more supervision in helping youngsters and their parents select books.

But, as Straughn says, "Wifey" is not the issue. Public libraries provide the residents of communities they serve with a wide variety of information, ideas and literature that they might otherwise find unaffordable or unavailable. For a library to be required to toss out a book because of the objections of a few is a disservice to the rest of the community.

THE NEWS AND OBSERVER
Raleigh, North Carolina
April 13, 1980

THE BOOK BURNERS

'Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty.'

—Thomas Jefferson

BY VOTING last week to ban a book from the public library, the five-member Columbus County Board of Commissioners proved once again the truth of Jefferson's warning.

Well-meaning commissioners of the down-east county, three of whom are up for re-election, unanimously ordered that the county librarian remove "Wifey," a former bestseller, from library shelves.

Their decision countermands two earlier votes by the Columbus County Library Board of Trustees, which affirmed its policy of leaving the library free and open to all citizens, with parents exercising individual control over materials read by their minor children.

Complaints from the mother of a 12-year-old girl who had checked out the book started the ruckus.

The now-controversial novel was authored by Judy Blume, ironically a writer of noted children's books including the award-winning "Are You There God? It's Me Margaret."

"Wifey" is Ms Blume's foray into adult literature and was described by Publishers Weekly magazine as "witty and explicit."

It shouldn't be necessary to have to defend freedom of information in this day and age. Freedom of expression has certainly been defended to just short of yelling "fire" in the proverbial crowded theater.

But short-sighted politicians, such as those in Whiteville, county seat of Columbus, remind us once again of Jefferson's admonition: The perils to freedom pop up all around and sometimes come dressed in the nicest of intentions.

When government, even tiny Columbus County, misuses the authority given it by the people, it must be stopped. Liberty is no less important in Whiteville than it is in Raleigh or Washington or Gastonia.

Education and information are as central to a working democracy as is the right to earn a profit. Individuals must be free to absorb any and all information they choose. Without that right, we can kiss our free form of government and our too often taken-for-granted liberties goodbye.

We send our moral support to the library board. Stand firm; read on and remember that at certain periods in history the Bible was burned for many of the same reasons people today want to censor what others read.

THE GASTONIA GAZETTE
Gastonia, North Carolina
April 15, 1980



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BOOK CENSORSHIP BY ANOTHER NAME

Lest Columbus County get all the blame—or credit, depending on your point of view—for public library censorship, something should be said about New Hanover's method of handling daring reading matter.

The New Hanover County commissioners haven't gone so far as to banish books from public libraries as the commissioners in Columbus did. There hasn't been a public demand for a purge in New Hanover, possibly for an obvious reason.

New Hanover libraries keep books such as "Wifey," the novel that brought down the wrath in Columbus, on a shelf behind the checkout desk, apart from the general run of books. Books on sex education and pregnancy also are kept on the special shelf out of harm's way. The idea is to keep juveniles from reading the books in the libraries or checking them out or maybe even knowing about their existence.

Regardless of the New Hanover libraries' good intentions, this is a form of censorship, even though a mild one. By hiding books after a fashion according to what someone or some group considers to be inappropriate reading material, the libraries are practicing censorship of a sort. The libraries clearly are designating books that some of their patrons will not be free to read.

Public libraries have a responsibility to stock their shelves, certainly, and it would be irresponsible if not illegal to circulate hard-core pornography. Librarians can be said to have a moral responsibility to try to dissuade young readers from taking on material beyond their years and ability to handle.

But saying even in a fairly subtle way what young people shall not read from a library's full run of offerings does not seem to us to be the county's proper responsibility.

WILMINGTON MORNING STAR
Wilmington, North Carolina
April 23, 1980